



# **Researching multilingually: theory and practice**

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# 1. Our aim

To draw on an ethnographic doctoral study on Mandarin-Chinese community schooling in England to investigate the value of a multilingual approach to community-based research, and particularly research of language community schooling.



## 2. Project context: research on and across languages

Focus on Chinese as heritage language

Chinese community schools as multilingual spaces

Different (possible) languages in the research context?

Previous studies: Mixed team of British (English speaking) researchers; 'Native speaker' researcher (Mandarin or Cantonese)

# 3. Methodology: RM-ly framework

**Our theoretical standpoints:**

- **Theoretical framework** created by **Holmes, Fay, Andrews, and Attia (2013, 2016)** that theorises RM-ly praxis (how researchers make choices about their linguistic resources in theorising, designing, undertaking, and writing up their research):

Intentionality

Spatiality (research spaces)

Relationality (relationships)

- **Reflection and reflexivity in community-based research** (Ganassin & Holmes, 2013)
- **RM-ly and researching ethically**



## 4. Emergent findings: intentionality and the role of English

**Centrality of English** depending on the fact that:

The study was located in an English university, and the researched schools, that largely represent Chinese speaking contexts, are in a predominantly English-speaking community.

Language repertoires of the researcher who was not able to offer full interviews in Mandarin (language of the schools and supposedly of the research participants)



# Languages and recruitment: the vantage point of a native speaker

The research design and language affordances of the researcher had an impact on the participant recruitment process

However:

In a context where many (Chinese) languages are spoken, who, as a researcher, can have the vantage point of a “native speaker”? How does the researcher’s linguistic identity shape his/her relationship with the participants?



# Research spaces

The spatial aspect of a research project concerns affordances and challenges offered by:

The **researched phenomenon** (a doctoral study on Chinese community schools in England); (ii) the research context (two Mandarin Chinese community schools); (iii) **the research resources** (language competencies of researcher and researched that included, but were not limited to, English and some Mandarin); and, (iv) **the representational possibilities** (i.e., dissemination in English; inclusion of data in Chinese).

# Findings: Research spaces and the research context

Different languages at play in the schools:

- 1) **Mandarin**, as the official language of the schools and the first or second language of a number of people involved;
- 2) **other** 方言 *fāngyán* (i.e., Cantonese, Hakka, and Hokkien) spoken by several adults and pupils; and,
- 3) **English**, often used as a lingua franca, and generally used by pupils to communicate with their peers.
- 4) **Other languages** were also part of the context of the school (e.g., Spanish, Vietnamese and Malay, the first languages of a minority of parents)





# Findings: English as a lingua franca

“Of course some people need to use English with other Chinese [parents] in the school. A lot of Mainlanders only speak Mandarin and there are people from Fujian, Malaysia or even Cantonese people that cannot speak Mandarin almost at all. Very few people are like me and can juggle all the languages and get a choice”. (excerpt from Adrian’s interview, Apple Valley school)

# Research spaces: what place for Italian?

- The researcher could not draw on the vantage point of native ethnography /native English speaker and writer
- Risk to feel estranged from her own writing  
However
- Italian was there at all times



# Research relationships: Trust and inclusivity

(Not) using interpreters and value of flexible multilingualism

Negotiating access and building friendships: the researcher a community member

Adult-researcher and child-participants: language and power

# (Not) using interpreters and value of flexible multilingualism

- Conscious decision of not using interpreters: creating a sense of distance with participants, impact on trust, engagement with data, ethical issues, financial issues.
- Opportunity to consider the hidden opportunities offered by both by research context and by the researcher's own research resources.
- Flexible multilingualism—a research strategy that draws upon the multilingual skills naturally present in the research context. This approach draws from her previous researcher experience in migrant communities (Ganassin & Holmes, 2013).
- Negotiation of a shared language—other than the native language of either the researcher or the participant—can provide an opportunity for neutralising the inbuilt power imbalance within research relationships (Ganassin & Holmes, 2013; Holmes et al., 2016).



# Negotiating access and building friendships: The researcher a community member

Chloe: Now that I know you and we are friends, I will speak to you like a Chinese speaks to another Chinese, which means that I will tell you the truth. How things really are. What people really think.

Sara: Do you mean that Chinese people only tell the truth to other Chinese?

Chloe: It's not about that. Because I know that you lived there [China] and you understand some of the language and our culture...it makes things easier.

(excerpt from Chloe's interview, Deer River school)

# Adult-researcher and child-participants: language and power

Roy: Where are you from? You don't sound from here.

Lily: No, and you don't look like the English [people].

Sara: You can try and guess.

Julian: Portugal or maybe Argentina?

Sara: Nope.

Roy: What about S. Marino? That's quite exotic.

Sara: [She laughs] Nearly there, I am from Italy. What about you?

Roy: I am just local. Well, a local Chinese, from Scotland.

(excerpt from pupil focus group, Deer River school)



## 5. Our conclusions

- Conducting a multilingual study/acknowledging a study as multilingual:

As multilingualism permeated the researcher's role at all stages, it had a major impact on the ethics of the research and the researcher reflexivity and also on researcher-participant linguistic agency and relationship-building and trust with participants.

Our findings support the need to embed a multilingual approach in the research methodology of a project (see, for example, Holmes et al., 2013) where multilingual interactions and language practices—of the researcher, participants, and context—are present.

Any language repertoire that the researcher brings into his or her research site contributes to the richness and uniqueness of his/her study.

# References

- Ganassin, S., & Holmes, P. (2013). Multilingual research practices in community research: The case of migrant/refugee women in North East England. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 23(3), 342-356.
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